Pay-as-you-throw aids recycling, study finds

By Mary Greczyn

LOS ANGELES — Programs charging higher disposal fees for extra trash bags can jump-start recycling programs dramatically, according to a new study that surveyed 500 communities.

The study, which quantifies the impact of various yard-waste and recycling policies on landfill diversion rates, indicated pay-as-you-throw efforts can boost recycling rates by an average of 8-11 percent.

The study's cosponsors — the Los Angeles-based Reason Foundation and the Seattle-based Skumatz Economic Research Associates — tout the results as a first attempt to statistically define program features that improve landfill diversion rates.

Researchers separated the impacts of programs such as curbside recycling from individual community differences such as materials collected, said Skumatz Economic Research Associates principal Lisa Skumatz, the study's author. A nationwide telephone survey collected data on programs, community demographics, budgets, relevant legislation and tonnage rates.

The statistical analysis of the results marks the first time such data has been compiled to move beyond anecdotal examples of how policy decisions affect recycling rates, Skumatz said.

The project provides formulas that let municipal planners plug in specific numbers, such as tonnage rates and recycling budgets, to project the impact of a program change, such as adding mixed paper or reducing collection frequency.

Curbside recycling alone may account for an average of 6-9 percentage points of tonnage diversion rates, the study found. Curbside yard-waste collection can boost landfill diversion by 8-9 percent.

Dropoff programs, on average, tend to have a more modest impact, the study shows. Yard-waste dropoff efforts, for example, account for 4-5 percent of diversion rates. Dropoff recycling programs account for an average of 3-4 percentage points of landfill diversion rates.

"Making a yard-waste program mandatory appears to add another 4-5 percentage points of diversion on average," said the study, whose cosponsors include the Environmental Protection Agency's Regions 5 and 9 and the Minnesota Office of Environmental Assistance. "The same effect was not found for mandatory recycling."

The study outlines detailed tradeoffs between decisions such as collecting a higher percentage of recyclables through weekly collections vs. added costs in equipment and labor.

As part of a joint curbside and dropoff recycling program, a variable-rate disposal program can account for 6-8 percent of a recycling rate, the study said.

"Given that these programs do not require any new trucks down the street, this continues to indicate strong evidence for implementing incentive pricing in communities with under-performing programs or communities that aren't reaching their goals," the study said.

Skumatz Economic Research Associates is conducting a similar study for the California chapter of the Solid Waste Association of North America, focusing more on the cost-effectiveness of attaining various levels of landfill diversion and looking at both the commercial waste and multifamily waste sectors. ■